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# THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE LAND GRANT COLLEGE IN OREGON

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## Abstract

The land grant colleges, funded by federal legislation in 1862, spawned public institutions in each state. The principle motivation for this funding was to create schools where practical education could be disseminated to the working classes. An example of the land grant school experience is revealed in the history of the college in Oregon. This paper chronicles funding legislation and the first sixty years of the system nationwide, then the Oregon State University experience is isolated to reveal the importance of key individuals, public perception, and outside forces that shaped the evolution of this institution.

# The Development of the Land Grant College in Oregon

Our national has had many colleges and universities--both public and private. In each state, however, there is one institution that is designated as a "land grant" school, funded in part each year under a series of federal acts dating back more than one hundred twenty years. Oregon State University, in Corvallis, is such a school, and its history has been molded to a great degree by this concept. The story of the development of the granting of federal land to start a college in each state, and the effect of this idea in Oregon is an interesting one.

Before 1850, the schools of higher education in the United States were few and far between, located for the most part east of the Appalachian Mountains. Moreover, they were really training schools for minsters or "normal" schools, training teachers for grammar schools. There was little "public education" as we know it today, and certainly little was taught of practical value to the farmers and shopkeepers west of the Cumberland Gap.[1]

The movement that led to the Congressional legislation was the reaction by educational leaders to the esoteric nature of most institutions of the day that did little to prepare farmers and laborers for their working lives . Justin Morrill first introduced the legislation in 1857 that would grant federal land to each state. This land was to be sold to create revenue for a college that was to provide a practical education to its

students.[2] When the Morrill Act was passed in 1982, thirty thousand acres of land per Congressional representative was made available to each state that chose to take advantage of the opportunity; however, not all states responded positively to federal involvement in higher education. Some welcomed the resources, while citizens of other regions resisted the idea. Oregon was one of the states eager for financial help.

Our state became involved in developing its land grant school as the result of the federal legislation, although there had been earlier unsuccessful attempts to begin publicly supported colleges.[3] The population of Oregon in the middle of the nineteenth century was small and scattered. A few schools, where the curricula was of a questionable rigor, founded by religious institutions, had been recently established in the state. Yet, when the Morrill Act was passed in 1862, no action was taken to utilize the funding until 1867. It was at this time that W.W. Moreland, a Corvallis citizen and clerk in the legislature, encouraged the state to take advantage of the funds because the legislation specified that at least one college was to be founded in the state within five years of the Act or the state would forfeit the land. Of the two schools suggested for such a designation--Willamette and Corvallis College--the choice was made to name Corvallis College as the Oregon land grant school. Corvallis College had been opened in 1856 as Corvallis Academy, then came under the control of the Methodist Episcopal

Church South in 1860, when financial difficulties caused it to be sold at sheriff's auction to a church reverend.[4]

The Oregon committee appointed to select the ninety thousand acres Oregon was to receive from the federal lands chose public land in Lake County in the southern part of the state, land deemed the least valuable of what was available at that time. (Apparently the feeling at the time was that this land was to provide a nucleus of support rather being sufficient to create comfortable ongoing resources for the school.) The sale of the land raised $202,113, and additional endowments created a fund of $246,865 for the school with an interest income of $6,746 in these early years.[5] So the land grant college was launched in Oregon, albeit feebly.

The first president of Oregon Agricultural College, William Findley, encountered difficulties in attempting to successfully direct the development of the college. One of the problems was the Methodist Episcopal Church South. The "South" designation was because the organizers were from the southern United States, and they desired to express their support of the southern cause in the Civil War. This created conflict in the community and the state, affecting enrollment. The church board continued to exist after the school's land grant designation, governing along side another board created to oversee the agricultural function. As a result, the school had both a campus in town and a thirty five farm some distance away, causing understandable confusion.[6]

In 1872 Benjamin Arnold arrived to be president of a faculty of four after President Findley left. Arnold, who was to remain as president at Corvallis until his death twenty years later, guided the school through difficult financial times. When he took charge, the school was in debt and had no money or class supplies. No other federal resources were made available because the school was to be a state responsibility. The infusion of $35,000 in state appropriations in 1872 temporarily provided operating funds.[7] In 1885, Corvallis College was separated from the Oregon Agricultural College by state legislation. Although the Episcopal Methodist Church South filed a lawsuit to stop this action, after several years the case was settled in favor of the state. This division to separate the Church board control removed the cloud of controversy from the campus and clarified its mission. Fortunately, The local citizens took pride in the new college at the farm site, as was evidenced by the construction of Benton Hall (then the campus central structure) in 1887 with funds and labor donated by the citizens of the area.[8]

The name, Oregon Agricultural College, belies the real scope of early education at Corvallis. Not surprisingly, the first instruction offered was of the traditionally classic form--Greek, Latin, and moral philosophy. The small staff and the number of courses each instructor--including the president--was expected to teach led to little chance for experimentation. Moreover, there was little training at Eastern schools for agriculture

instruction, in fairness to the early teachers. As an example, because of the small staff, B.J. Hawthorne, a man of classical letters, headed the agricultural college as well as teaching Greek and Latin. This early faculty was an interesting collection of individuals from near and far who were pressed into service and received little compensations for their labors. Some stayed to become career teachers, but others moved on after a short stay.[9]

Some of the professors, however, did not limit themselves to the ways of the past, and Oregon was fortunate to have some amazing pioneers in the idea of practical education. An example of this was Household Economy and Sanitation, one of the eight original chairs established by the Board of Regents. In 1889, a new faculty member, Margaret Snell, arrived. Her duties encompassed running the women's dormitory, teaching health, and functioning as the entire Household Economy school. Her first group of students consisted of twenty-four women, and under her guidance this number was to triple in size in three years. She was known for her belief in good health habits as preventive medicine, and she behaved as a modern example for her students. Women at the college were not permitted to take any courses outside Household Economy until 1900, yet Snell's remarkable persistence helped establish the first college of Home Economics west of the Mississippi and the fourth such college in the nation.[10] But the new teaching ideals and dedicated professors

were not enough; the students themselves were a mixed bag of preparedness for college.

It is difficult to assess the caliber of those early students. Public and private preparatory schools were few and far between, numbering but four in the state in 1900. Instructors complained that farmer's sons were often absent during planting and harvest times. The college itself was financially limited through most of its early years, providing most of its funding from federal actions, not state revenues, making budgeting for growth and improvement very difficult. Oregon Agricultural College, therefore, despite its land grant designation, was often nearly destitute. An example of this is that the school budget was doubled when the Hatch Act of 1887 (to be discussed shortly) infused $15,000 into the college; since little or no monies were forthcoming from state funds, the federal allotment barely kept the school in operation. In 1900 each member of the college staff of nine was expected to teach courses from a minimum of three unrelated subject areas. In 1906 the preparatory department admitted students with an eighth grade education, while the college proper required two years of high school prior to admission.[11]

The goal of the land grant school was to provide practical education that the original legislation intended. What was needed to bring this ideal to fruition was a body of information for instruction. This was provided as a result of the passage of the Hatch Act of 1887 that created Agricultural experiment

stations. This infusion of federal money into the college, with additional funds provided by the second Morrill Act of 1890, broadened the curriculum offerings, and subjects came to be of a practical, less classical nature. Enrollment gradually increased, until by 1897 there were three hundred eighteen students enrolled in nine, four-year courses of study and five two-year programs. The school became noted for its poultry research and animal husbandry programs. The Oregon Agricultural College began to attract students from other areas besides the nearby counties, and this was reflected in the enrollment figures. In 1906-7 there were eight hundred thirty-three students, more than doubling the school's student population in a ten-year period. College services improved. The first librarian, Ida Kidder, arrived in 1908 and worked for fifteen years to organize and build a collection of books from what had previously been shifted around between campus store rooms and a literary society office. Her giving nature and tireless efforts caused her to be remembered by students who attended Oregon Agricultural college from all over the world. A permanent library facility was built in 1918 as more construction funds became available.[12] Oregon State Agriculture College was now attracting attention back East.

Accreditation, an issue for many of these struggling institutions, was not a major concern for Oregon Agricultural College, as it was well respected in the nation for the programs it offered. In 1920, Dr. Zook, a specialist in higher education

at the Bureau of Education, United States Department of the Interior, after inspection, reported the college as fulfilling each requirement of a standard college. Other accrediting visitations followed and were successful.[13]

All was not perfect, however. A 1910 study comparing Oregon Agricultural College to other "separate" land grant schools showed the institution lagged behind other land grant schools in its offerings. (A "separate" institution is one where a state university system had also been established in the state.) Compared to eighteen other separate colleges, Oregon had just nine out of twenty leading majors and six out of eleven programs that were to be found in more than fifty percent of the colleges.[14] What Oregon State Agriculture College now needed was a strong leader, and that is what it found in Dr. Kerr.

As with most of these struggling schools, it took a person of vision, in combination with increased federal funds, to see the potential of the institution. That person arrived at Oregon in 1907. William J. Kerr became the president for the next twenty-five years, and during his tenure the college grew substantially. The board that recruited Kerr from the presidency of Utah State Agricultural College gave him support and a free hand to shape the college. Kerr had been frustrated in his attempts to bring change to Utah, and it was the opportunity to be innovative at Oregon that attracted him to the struggling college. An able administrator, he established four schools with acting deans because he believed in the distribution of

responsibility. These schools were Forestry, Mines (later Engineering), Pharmacy, and Education. Coursework in health and physical education, science, business, and technology were added later under his presidency.[15]

Unlike his predecessors, Kerr saw as part of his duties the role of lobbyist at the state legislature and publicizer of the college. He was one of the earliest United States college presidents to realize the value of public relations. Kerr was a regular visitor to the state capital and outspoken proponent of the land grant concept. As one of his predecessors, President Benjamin Arnold, relayed in this excerpt of his discussion of the public perception of the land grant school, much work was required to educate the public about the mission of the institution:

> There are and always have been, three principal classes of people in the community, formed by their several views of Agricultural Colleges and their work. The first class regards these colleges merely as institutions of learning, differing in no respect (or in some very important matters) from other colleges. The second class holds that they are, or ought to be, wholly technical. The third considers them as mere workshops for training boys in plowing, ditching, stock raising, carpentering, blacksmithing, etc.; as mere schools to supply the place of apprenticeship. Hence it comes to pass that every man has his own ideal of an

> Agricultural College, and criticizes all these institutions when not managed in accordance with his own plans . . . [16]

Kerr was very aware of this confusion and took it upon himself to educate the citizens of the state. To publicize the school, Kerr arranged for demonstration railroad cars to travel the state, relaying agricultural information to the public. Agricultural courses were presented on campus to farmers to inform them on new techniques and gain their support, actions consistent with the concept first used in Wisconsin--that the borders of the state were the territory of the land grant school. It was also at this time that the final cornerstone of federal legislation allowed this to be possible: the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, that funded the state Extension service.

The efforts of Dr. Kerr to bring change to Oregon Agricultural College had visible results. The millage tax he lobbied to pass financed the major buildings that were constructed during his presidency--the Men's Gym, Women's Building, Kidder Hall, Home Economics Hall, Covell Hall, and the Memorial Union. Kerr's first budget was eighty-eight thousand dollars; his last was over two million dollars. The recognized strengths of the college at this time were Mechanical and Industrial Arts, Home Economics, and Agriculture.[17]

Dr. Kerr was also a national figure in the land grant system. In 1910 he was elected president of the American Association of Agricultural Colleges and Experiment Stations. In

this role he led the fight against forces that opposed federal and state funds for land grant colleges. His essay, that was a reply to the Fourth Annual Report of the Carnegie Commission, which had been critical of land grant institutions, reviewed the economic gains that Kerr declared could be attributed to the education and services provided by the system. As such, Kerr helped pave the way for land grant colleges to be recognized as integral parts of American higher education in each state.[18]

Kerr's presidency was not without criticism. Normal schools and the University of Oregon felt threatened by the majority of public funds' going to the agricultural college. Twice efforts were made to merge the two schools, but both attempts were unsuccessful. The protracted struggle between liberal studies and the mechanical arts focus led to the formation of a state level Department of Higher Education and a governing body for all state institutions of higher education.

The early years of the land grant school in Oregon reflected many of the trends experienced by land grant colleges throughout the nation. The school struggled to survive until public support was achieved through the leadership of several key individuals. Although the difficult times of the Depression were ahead, the potential of the institution was now ready to be realized. The school that had been called Corvallis Academy, Oregon Agriculture College, and Oregon State Agriculture College was to be renamed Oregon State College and, finally, in 1963, Oregon State University.

## Notes

[1] John S. Brubacher and Willis Rudy, **Higher Education in Transition** (New York, 1976), 60.

[2] Brubacher and Rudy **op. cit.**, 62.

[3] Asahel Bush, **Journal of the Council of the Territory of Oregon During the Second Regular Session of the Legislative Assembly**, December 2, 1850 (Oregon City, 1851), 68.

[4] Lillian S. Van Loan, **Historical Perspective of Oregon State College** (Oregon, 1959), 30.

[5] G. Lester Anderson, ed. **Land Grant Universities and their Continuing Challenge** (Michigan, 1976), Appendix Table 2 and 3.

[6] Van Loan **op. cit.**, 35.

[7] Robert C. Clark, **History of the Willamette Valley, Oregon** (Chicago, Ill., 1927), 24.

[8] This information is contained in **Oregon State College Biennial Reports** (Oregon, 1879),15, and from the **Benton Hall Cornerstone Celebration** (1987), 1.

[9] James W. Groshong, **The Making of a University: 1868-1968** (Oregon, 1968), 6-7.

[10] A compilation of information is contained in **Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Founding of the School of Home Economics** (Salem, Oregon, 1940), 54-56, and **Curricular Allocations in the Oregon State System of Higher Education--Sixty-Six Years of Planned Development** (Salem, Oregon, 1975), 12.

[11] **The Orange and Black** (Oregon, 1938), 26-7, and **Oregon State College Biennial Reports** (Oregon, 1914), 8, and **Statistics of the Land Grant Colleges and Agricultural Experiment Stations in the United States for 1897** (Washington, D.C., 1898) No. 51.

[12] **Oregon State College Catalog 1909-10, 1933-4, and 1943-4** (Oregon, 1909, 1933, and 1943)

[13] **Orange and Black op cit.**, 56.

[14] An enlightening discussion is presented in **How Complete is Oregon State College as a Separate Land Grant Institution?** (Oregon, 1910).

[15] A detailed study of Kerr's life is contained in the work by Edwin T. Reed, **William Jasper Kerr, A Biography** (Oregon, 1948).

[16] **Biennial Reports** (1885) **op. cit.**, 5.

[17] **Reed op. cit.**, 134-145.

[18] **Groshong op. cit.**, 23.